YOUTH COUNCIL OF NEW BRUNSWICK

CONSEIL DE LA JEUNESSE DU NOUVEAU-BRUNSWICK

INTEGRATION: FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF YOUTH

a brief prepared for the hearings on integration

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New Brunswick

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PREFACE

The Youth Council of New Brunswick was appointed in 1987 as an advisory body to government and to the public on matters of concern to youth. The Council is a non-partisan organization composed of 15 young New Brunswickers between the ages of 15 and 24, chosen to represent all regions of the province, both official language groups, agencies representing youth and, when possible, social, cultural and visible minorities.

The Youth Council provides a direct link between youth and the Premier; researches and consults; makes public important issues; hears petitions and suggestions; and publishes reports, studies and recommendations.

Through the Youth Council of New Brunswick, all young people of the province have the opportunity to voice their opinions, needs and concerns.

INTRODUCTION

The Youth Council of New Brunswick is pleased to have this opportunity to address the question of integration. We recognize that this is a major issue which has and will have ramifications for all young people in the province. Indeed, we feel it is indispensable for the Committee to hear the views of young people in order to properly assess and consider all aspects of the question.

The Youth Council can play a part in providing a provincial voice for youth however, we hope that the Committee has had the opportunity to confer in some depth with young people presently in integrated classrooms, and if not, we urge the members to do so before they submit their report. Youth are often forgotten in the consultation process and can be intimidated by more formal procedures through which they may be heard. Students can tell us from personal experience where the system is working for them and where it is not. It is the students who will reap the benefits of our efforts to implement a fair system with respect to integration, but they will also suffer the consequences of any inefficient or inadequate measures put into place. We must use their particular expertise to guide us in developing a school system in which all can flourish.

In preparation for this presentation, the Youth Council reviewed several resources. In particular, close attention was paid to the reports submitted by the anglophone and francophone advisory committees formed to study integration, tabled in the Legislature this Spring by the Honourable Shirley Dysart, Minister of Education. It was felt that these reports presented a thorough study of the issue and contained a number of important and useful recommendations. Although there are differences between them, for the most part the issues they identify are the same and they offer many equivalent recommendations. We believe that the information contained in these two documents should be compared and their recommendations implemented on the basis of several guiding principles. The Youth Council's intent with this report, is to present these guiding principles which we feel can help to insure a fair and successful system of integration across the province.

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. "The Youth Council of New Brunswick supports integration with the sole reservation that decisions relating to its implementation not be detrimental to the integrated student or to the progress of the rest of the class."

The above statement reflects a unanimous decision taken by the Youth Council on July 9th of this year. Although the Council had in past meetings discussed the issue of integration within the context of other subjects, and supported its implementation, a formal position had not been taken. When public hearings were announced this Spring, the Council returned to the question. Each member was asked to contribute during discussions, and in particular, those who had studied in an integrated classroom as a special needs student or otherwise, were asked to share their thoughts and experiences.

Few had reservations and comments heard were mostly positive. Most felt that what all students could learn through integration by far outweighed any possible inconveniences. However, the Council cautioned that there is no such thing as a blanket solution. In the implementation of full integration, it is imperative that:

1. provisions be made for individual needs and differences and;
2. for students to have a choice in those provisions.

We must emphasize that the Council believes that full integration for all students into regular classrooms is the ultimate goal and should be striven for. By far, the vast majority of special needs students will be capable of full integration. All resources necessary to permit and facilitate this should be made available to schools, teachers, and students, and guidelines and procedures must stress this point at every level. We wish to make clear that the Council does not support the "ghettoization" of special needs students, nor does it support auxiliary classes as they once existed. These options cannot be the answer. Flexibility must be built into the system to allow the best possible scenario for all students. Nonetheless, we

cannot ignore individual needs which may require additional support, alternative learning situations and specialized attention. Some students may require special assistance in certain courses, or for particular learning disabilities, and some of these services may not be realistically provided in the classroom setting. Some students may not even feel comfortable in a regular classroom and might welcome personal assistance or specialized learning situations. For a few individuals, complete integration into a regular classroom for all subjects may not be the best way to meet their needs and may, in fact, be detrimental to their learning. For these special needs students, the classroom is suitable for only part of the day and perhaps, in the rare case, not at all.

The goal of education, and indeed, of integration, should be to enable all students to reach their maximum potential in terms of knowledge, competence and independence, in order to allow them to responsibly and actively participate in society. Some students may not be able to achieve this without specialized attention.

In keeping with our belief that the preferred placement for any student is in a regular classroom, but that this may not always be possible: **we recommend that clear guidelines and criteria be developed, equally applicable to all schools in the province, regardless of language of instruction or of location in the province, to assist in determining levels of intervention for special needs students and listing acceptable alternatives to full integration when this is not possible. These guidelines should be developed in consultation with the Department of Education: Anglophone/Francophone sectors, school districts, teachers, students, and appropriate community groups.**

2. "Students with special needs must be included in any decision making process which affects them."

Students are not always consulted on issues which affect them, yet most are fully capable of making decisions when properly informed. At the very least, they will have preferences which should be taken into account. In situations where it may

not be possible to actively involve a student, every effort must be made to determine the individual's wishes and to take these into consideration. This is particularly true with respect to placement or individual study programs.

In consulting students, caution must be taken to avoid placing them in a position where they are expected to simply "rubber stamp" decisions taken by others. They must be given options and the opportunity to ask questions. They must also have available someone whom they trust to advise them before any decisions are taken. Situations can too easily occur where they are explained the whys of a decision and expected to agree.

Eventhough the acquisition of independence is a gradual process, we must allow students to take active participation in determining their own lives and their individuality from the very beginning. It is also imperative that we keep in mind that assisting does not mean doing for others. Examples cited by students included situations in which they or their friends were discouraged from enroling into a certain course. The explaination given was that the course would be "too difficult" or "too taxing", or "not well suited to their abilities". This kind advice can limit students and prevent them from achieving their full potential. Council members feel that students should not be denied the opportunity to succeed for fear of failing.

We recommend that any process designed to determine placement of a student require active involvement by that student. We also recommend that students be consulted in choosing or designing any alternative programs to regular classroom instruction and that their wishes be taken into consideration.

3. "A minimum standard of services, supports and resources must be available to all special needs students regardless of language of instruction and location within the province."

In discussions concerning other matters in the area of education, the Youth Council has wrestled with the problem of the division of responsibilities within the

Department of Education along linguistic lines, and then by district. Although a certain sharing of authority is a good system of checks and balances which allows different groups and regions to accommodate the particular needs of their community, the Council strongly believes that there must be a much greater degree of uniformity in curriculum, in services to students, in philosophy, and in supports and standards throughout the province. This is true with respect to courses in life skills, sex education, arts, physical education and leisure, to name a few, and is also necessary with respect to such programs as peer counselling and other student services. A student in one area of New Brunswick should not receive services at a lower level than if he or she were enroled in another district, or if his or her language of instruction were different. The need for equality and uniformity will become even more important with respect to services, supports and philosophy for integrated students if all are to be given an equal chance.

We recommend that both linguistic sectors of the Department of Education work cooperatively to develop a policy statement and implementation guidelines with respect to integration that will be uniformly applicable to all regions and school districts of the province.

4. "Adequate resources must be available to school districts, teachers and students to allow for successful integration."

The Council recognizes that some special needs students will require specific supports and equipment in order to realize their potential. The Council is also aware that teachers with special needs students in their classroom may require assistance in providing care for some students, and will need relief time for in-service training, consultation, and parent-teacher meetings. In keeping with this, the Department of Education and the government of New Brunswick must make available adequate resources to enable full integration to occur without undue limitations to the learning capacity of students, and without placing unfair burdens on teachers. These will include both human and material resources and a list of priorities will need to be determined collectively by all parties involved.

The Council would like to point out that since integration has proceeded at differing rates throughout the province, a program may be necessary to insure that areas with limited capabilities are given the opportunity to improve the standard and availability of services offered at an accelerated pace. This must be one of the Department's priorities.

We recommend that all school districts in the province be afforded the resources required to enable all special needs students to learn at their full potential and to give teachers the time and assistance necessary to do their jobs well, without undue hardship.

5. "All teachers must be capable of identifying, understanding and assisting students with special needs if full integration is to be successful."

When we consider the challenges of the integrated classroom, we must recognize the need for teachers to obtain greater expertise and a larger breadth of knowledge on learning, physical, and mental disabilities; teaching techniques to accommodate different learning styles; methods to foster understanding and friendship between all students regardless of differences; and assistance in developing greater personal understanding.

Teachers who presently complete their studies in New Brunswick do not all receive training in the area of special education. Those who are already in the system may also be lacking training in this area. All educators must be provided with opportunities to increase their knowledge. In-service programs must be developed and made increasingly available in order that all teachers in the province receive the information and training necessary to assist them in working at an established minimum standard of service and comfort with youth of differing needs. Such programs will benefit both the teacher and student.

We recommend that adequate resources be provided to the Department of Education to enable school districts to supply in-service training for teachers that will equip them with the knowledge and understanding crucial to meeting the new challenges that they face in the integrated classroom.

6. "Curriculum must be designed and introduced to foster understanding between all students in order to prevent discrimination against special needs students."

Most students have positive things to say about their experiences with integration. They feel that the presence of a disabled student in their classroom is a privilege because of the opportunity to learn more about certain disabilities and very often, the special needs student helps them to see beyond their disability. Students who have special needs and are studying or have studied in a regular classroom rarely state that they would have preferred a segregated classroom. For the most part, those who have not had any personal experiences with integration often feel like they "missed out" on something.

When negative views of integration are discussed or brought up publicly, one usually hears of disturbances caused by some special needs students which make learning impossible for other students. When the topic was presented for discussion by members, they expressed a lack of concern over the possibility of occasional outbursts caused by students with behavioral problems, equating them to the disruptions of the "average" class clown. In the rare instance where a situation were so extreme that a teacher was unable to assist the student in modifying his or her behaviour, members felt that established guidelines should be developed with a broad number of intervention strategies aimed at resolving the problem ie. temporary suspension from the classroom, with special assistance, etc.

There can be no question that integration is a positive development in our school system when we ask the students themselves about their thoughts on the

subject. However, there are nonetheless those who are left with negative feelings and thoughts. Out of ignorance, some students may ridicule others for their differences. Discrimination and taunting still occurs and it is one of the challenges of integration that a special needs student should not have to face.

We recommend that increased emphasis be placed on implementing curriculum in the school system which will foster a greater understanding of disabilities and of the special challenges faced by disabled persons, and to create harmony and friendship between all students.

7. "Discrimination against special needs students must be combatted not only in the schools, but also in the community."

Some students may lack knowledge and understanding about the nature and effects of some disabilities but this misfortune is not theirs alone. Ignorance can be present at all levels within the community, and undoubtably this effects the level of acceptance which exists for the concept of integration. Some parents may feel confused or disturbed about the effects integration may have on their non "special needs" child's education. The reaction of such parents can conflict with the messages their children receive at school, causing these students to feel confused. In addition, parents' reactions can contribute to discriminatory behaviour in children.

If we hope to change attitudes successfully, education must not only be undertaken in the schools, but also at the community level throughout the province. This is a task that can be shared by both the Department of Education, interest groups, and professional associations.

We recommend that the Department of Education work in conjunction with interested groups in a leadership role to develop a program to foster awareness and understanding within the community of the importance of integration and its success within the New Brunswick school system.

8. "In developing guidelines and planning to meet the demands placed on the system by integration, consideration must be given to the diverse group that is included under the term "special needs students".

The Council would like to stress that integration should enable all children and youth to access and participate in a school system which will make every attempt to meet their individual needs. Many aspects will have to be considered in the provision of services and resources from the accessibility of buildings, to specialized learning programs and equipment, to increased training programs for educators. However, we are concerned with the possibility that certain groups are forgotten when we speak of "special needs students." A clearer definition must be provided to teachers and administrators in order that all students may benefit from the initiative of integration. In working towards an improved system capable of providing special services to maximize the learning potential of exceptional students, we must ensure that the gifted and those experiencing learning disabilities are served as well as those with physical, emotional or mental disabilities.

We recommend that the group of students identified as "special needs" be better defined and that emphasis be placed on insuring that gifted and learning disabled students are not overlooked.

CONCLUSION

To reiterate on a point made in a brief to the Ombudsman regarding youth and The New Brunswick Human Rights Act, as an advisory council, we are striving to help build a society that reflects a sense of fairness towards all its members; a society that allows us to live our lives unhindered by arbitrary or unnecessary restrictions. This also means an equal right to an education within the public school system. We strongly believe in full integration and we hope that these hearings, and the work undertaken by the Special Committee on Social Policy Development, by the Department of Education and all interested groups and individuals who have contributed to the discussion on integration will bring about a strong and renewed direction with respect to integration within our school system.

The youth of New Brunswick are fortunate to live in this province. Much has been undertaken on their behalf in recent years and it is our sincere hope that the current trend towards improving the status of children and youth will continue both within the school system and without. We sincerely hope that the thoughts and views of young New Brunswickers contained in this brief will provoke a positive reaction and spark action to implement an improved and fair system for all.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. We recommend that clear guidelines and criteria be developed, equally applicable to all schools in the province, regardless of language of instruction or of location in the province, to assist in determining levels of intervention for special needs students and listing acceptable alternatives to full integration when this is not possible. These guidelines should be developed in consultation with the Department of Education: Anglophone/Francophone sectors, school districts, teachers, students, and appropriate community groups.

2. We recommend that any process designed to determine placement of a student require active involvement by that student. We also recommend that students be consulted in choosing or designing any alternative programs to regular classroom instruction and that their wishes be taken into consideration.

3. We recommend that both linguistic sectors of the Department of Education work cooperatively to develop a policy statement and implementation guidelines with respect to integration that will be uniformly applicable to all regions and school districts of the province.

4. We recommend that all school districts in the province be afforded the resources required to enable all special needs students to learn at their full potential and to give teachers the time and assistance necessary to do their jobs well, without undue hardship.

5. We recommend that adequate resources be provided to the Department of Education to enable school districts to supply in-service training for teachers that will equip them with the knowledge and understanding crucial to meeting the new challenges that they face in the integrated classroom.

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